CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

By ARTHUR BARTLETT MAURICE.

THERE is now on exhibition at the New York Public Library a collection of about 1,500 of those rare little books and magazines which, beginning about the year 1859, were issued under the broad and general title of "Dime Novels." More than 1,300 of them are publications of the house of Beadle & Adams, of which Erastus Beadle, the Otsego printer, was the guiding spirit. There is a particular timeliness that lends interest to the exhibition, for, for some reason or other—possibly the death two months ago of the author of the "Nick Carter" series started it—the "Dime Novel" in its various aspects has been a live topic recently, hardly a day passing without an editorial appearing in some newspaper on the subject.

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THE *Bulletin* of the New York Public Library sees in the collection, which is the gift of Dr. Frank P. O'Brien of New York, more than a mere form of reading of the past, designed to entertain youth of a former generation not over fastidious in its insistence on literary style and construction. "An absorbingly interesting assemblage of a pioneer literature which has now wholly vanished, but which for a generation exercised a profound influence on the country's thought, character and habits of mind"—these are the *Bulletin's* words, and it goes on to say: "The collection is literally saturated with the pioneer spirit of America. It portrays the struggles, exploits, trials, dangers, feats, hardships and daily lives of the American pioneers from the days of the Puritans to the death of Custer and breathes the spirit which for two centuries and a half shaped the conquest of the continent north of the Rio Grande."

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THE *Bulletin* goes beyond the point of characterizing; it extolls: "It is a literature intensely nationalistic and patriotic in character; obviously designed to stimulate adventure, self-reliance and achievement; to exalt the feats of the pioneer men and women who settled the country and to recite the conditions under which those early figures lived and did their work. It is in those obvious qualities that the cause of the immense vogue of the Beadle books is to be found during their generation. It was in these attributes also that their equally great popularity lay, and no serious student who seeks to understand the history of this country and many of its present tendencies can fail to obtain a better understanding of such matters by a study of the collection now on view. It is a clinic in the subject of mass psychology; as valuable to the university professor for its significant historical revelations as it is to the gray haired man to whom it recalls memories of boyhood."

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OF course there will always be those who see in the "primrose on a river's bank" only a primrose. In its day there were persons who failed to recognize in the "Dime Novel" those highly stimulating qualities which the *Bulletin* emphasizes. From the pulpit it was often denounced as pernicious in its influence on men and boys, just as the moving picture is being denounced to-day. This department of the Book Section has no wish to engage in that controversy long dead. But one or two points may legitimately be introduced. At its worst in the old "Dime Novel" there was absent the leer of sex. Its syntax may have been unsound, but its spirit was all right. It played up the homely virtues and pointed the homely morals. When evil triumphed it was only for a moment. Beneath the extravagances and crudities there was a fine and wholesome sense of optimism.

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WHO was the Erastus Beadle whose name has come down to us so closely associated with the "Dime Novel" of the '60s and '70s? He was born of Revolutionary ancestry in Pierstown, Otsego County, N. Y., September 11, 1821. With forebears who had dared the wilderness, he himself experienced the wilderness at the age of 12, when he was taken on an overland migration occupying many weeks to Michigan Territory. Returning to New York State, Erastus Beadle worked on a farm and then as apprentice to a miller. One day some letters for labeling the bags of grain were needed in the mill and Erastus cut the letters from blocks of hardwood, just as the old block letters had been made before the days of Gutenberg. That turned his mind to printing, and later, in Cooperstown, he learned to be a typesetter, printer and binder, and with these abilities as his only capital moved in 1847 to the village of Buffalo. Five years later he had a printing shop of his own.

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IT was in 1860 that in New York he began his series of "Dime Novels" in orange covers. He enlisted the assistance of the best available writers who possessed knowledge of American pioneer life, and intrusted the editorship of the house to Orville J. Victor. The *Bulletin* speaks of Victor as "one of the most remarkable figures in the history of American literature" and goes on to say: "For thirty years Victor personally studied, passed upon and edited the thousands of publications of the house of Beadle. He insisted first of all that the narratives must be true and accurate portrayals in spirit of the pioneer times and people with which they dealt. They had to reveal wilderness life and struggle as it was. . . . These tales were not history in the literal or textbook sense, since they often incorporated incidents for which there was no authentic or contemporary proof. But such material, if used, had to be consistent with known conditions of the period portrayed."

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IN the civil war the "Dime Novel" played its part. In the trenches the soldiers absorbed the orange covered books by the million. The volumes were exchanged, passed from hand to hand, read to tatters and then thrown away. One book of the series was Mrs. Victor's "Maum Guinea," depicting negro slavery. That book Henry Ward Beecher took with him when Lincoln sent him to England as a special commissioner in an effort to win support for the Union from the British Cabinet. Beecher afterward told Victor that "Maum Guinea" had been one of his most telling shots and the *Bulletin* further informs us that "Maum Guinea" was preferred by President Lincoln as a portrayal of slavery over Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin." The war over, Beadle and Victor turned their attention to the far West, enlisting the aid of Western explorers, Indian fighters and plainsmen, and Beadle himself made a trip across the plains in order to study at first hand the life in those regions.

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BUT all the tales of that period were not of the far West, the Indian fighter and the plainsman. One can turn to those stories for a New York that is as remote from the city of to-day as is the New York depicted in, for example, Porter's "Allan Dale and Robert le Diable." Strange and unfamiliar corners of Manhattan Island are recalled in the pages of those "Dime Novels"; names almost forgotten but occasionally brought to mind when some antiquarian writes to the newspapers arguing, for instance, about Edgar Allan Poe's various residences in New York. Perhaps it never had reality, but it is a delightful old town, rich in the possibility of adventure, that is reflected in those pages. There were mysterious faces outlined against windows of houses of side streets. Letters calling for assistance or conveying warning of some stupendous crime that was maturing, were always falling at the venturer's feet.

IN those stories the rivers, particularly at night, were dark with delightful mystery. The land and the structures along the waterfronts were pictured as being honeycombed with secret passages. When the sun went down and the shadows gathered pirate launches—nothing to do with bootlegging—crept through Hell Gate and ran stealthily down toward the Battery in quest of booty and the opportunity for nefarious deeds, to depart at break of day for estuaries of Long Island or New Jersey. In the vivid imagination of youth, stimulated by these tales, the lower East Side loomed up as a mysterious region inhabited solely by dangerous and picturesque criminals. The very name Five Points carried with it the impression of gloom. Later the sinister glory of Five Points in fiction passed on to the Gas House District and Hell's Kitchen.

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WHILE no one has ever attributed literary style to the "Dime Novel" it certainly possessed the virtue of the short sentence. Here, for example, is a sample of the dialogue of that masterpiece of forty years ago, "Ferret, the Man of a Million Disguises," which probably is not to be found in the collection now being shown at the Public Library:

"Hist!"

The burglar's voice broke the stillness of the night.

"Who goes there?"

"I."

"You?"

"Yes."

"The deed is done."

"Done?"

"Yes, done."

"The swag?"

"Is here."

"There?"

"Yes, here."

"In the bag?"

"In the bag."

"It is well."

"Ha! Whose voice is that?"

"Whose voice!"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Who am I?"

"Yes, who are you?"

"Ferret, the man of a million disguises!"

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THE recent publication of "William De Morgan and His Wife," which has been reviewed in the book section, seems to have stirred again into life the old discussion about authorship and age. The astonishing feature of De Morgan's achievement was not that in his eighth decade he was writing novels of the first order, but that he began to write when a very old man, learning a new trade, as it were, when well along in the sixties. Ten years before the appearance of "Joseph Vance" George Du Maurier had astonished readers while delighting them by producing, at the age of sixty or thereabouts, in quick succession "Peter Ibbetson," "Trilby" and "The Martian." But that was not at all the same thing. Writing the captions for his illustrations in *Punch*, laboriously seeking compression, effect and the *mot juste*, had been the very best possible training for his new *metier*.

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AMERICAN writers, with a few exceptions, have been young beginners. To illustrate by reference to certain names of men now conspicuously holding the attention: Booth Tarkington had reached what probably seemed to him then the advanced age of almost thirty before he scored, practically simultaneously, with "The Gentleman from Indiana" and "Monsieur Beaucaire." But before that he had gone through a long apprenticeship of arduous toil and disappointment; like his hero, John Harkless, "for seven years sitting on a rail fence in Indiana." Actually he was a potential novelist back in his undergraduate days at Princeton. Winston Churchill's "The Celebrity" and "Richard Carvel," the latter read from one end of the land to the other, were both published in the '90s of the last century, and Churchill's class at the Naval Academy was 1894. When Stewart Edward White was 29 some one summed him up as a young man of decided promise. He had already written "The Claim Jumpers," "The Blazed Trail" and "The Westerners" and was about to publish "Conjurer's House."

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SINCLAIR LEWIS was a doddering old man of thirty-odd when "Main Street" appeared to take the country by storm, but before actual senility had descended upon him he had published such novels as "Mr. Wrenn," "Free Air" and "His Wife's Job." No one could possibly be so young as Scott Fitzgerald seems in "This Side of Paradise" and "The Beautiful and Damned"—the flippancy carries no thought of disparagement, but is meant in genuine appreciation of Mr. Fitzgerald's high talent—and Fitzgerald was Princeton vintage of 1917. Owen Johnson's first novel, "Arrows of the Almighty," was written when he was an undergraduate at Yale. He really began before that, for while a schoolboy at Lawrenceville, where he was the editor of the *Lawrenceville Literary Magazine*, he was more or less consciously gathering the material that went to the making of "The Eternal Boy," "The Varmint," "The Tennessee Shad" and "The Humming-Bird."

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JOSEPH HERGESHEIMER, now deservedly on the high tide of success, may seem well on in years to the eyes of extreme youth. As a matter of fact he is in his young middle age. It was only yesterday that he emerged from comparative obscurity. For seventeen years before he had been writing fine but unappreciated novels. (Incidentally, have you read the reprints of "Tubal Cain," "Wild Oranges" and "The Dark Fleece" recently issued in single volumes by Knopf?) The other day an English review referred to Floyd Dell as one of the American writers still in his twenties. He is not quite as young as that, but he is still young enough to be able to regard "Moon Calf" and "The Briary Bush," excellent as those books are in quality, as experimental novels, and to turn his face resolutely to the building for the future."

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ON the other hand some of the books of all time that have proved most enduring have been written by men of ripe years. The fruit of Balzac's literary activity in his twenties, though abundant, was practically worthless. Though burned out by excessive toil and the inordinate drinking of coffee, when he died at a little past 50 he was just swinging into his literary stride. Thackeray was practically a literary hack, having his work slashed ruthlessly to suit editorial convenience, until, when nearing 40, he found himself, in the passage which told that, after the battle of Waterloo, "no more firing was heard in Brussels; the pursuit rolled miles and miles away; and Amelia was on her knees, praying for George, who was lying on his face, dead, with a bullet through his heart."

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BUT there were others who had to wait even later for the fulfillment of their hopes. Samuel Richardson was past 50 before achieving success. The first part of "Pamela" was written in two months of the winter of 1739-40 and published in the latter year. Boswell had passed 50 when the work that made him immortal, his "Life of Dr. Johnson," was written. (By the way, the very handsome Temple Bar edition of the famous "Life" in ten volumes has just come from the press of Gabriel Wells for Messrs. Doubleday, Page & Co.) After achieving this success Boswell lived only four years and died sadly and ignominiously. Cervantes was 58 when, in spite of his miseries, he found the opportunity for completing the first part of "Don Quixote." Daniel Defoe was 58 years of age when he wrote "Robinson Crusoe," and at the same age Locke produced his essay "Concerning Human Understanding." Milton was 59 when "Paradise Lost" was published. Samuel Johnson was 68 when he began to write his "Lives of the Poets," which has been called the most masculine and massive body of criticism in the language.

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WHO are the leading figures in American literature who have come to the front in the last ten years? For the purpose of having some light thrown on that question the *Literary Digest* has been conducting a kind of poll, the result of which is presented in the current issue. The editor of a prominent London daily asked the editor of the *Digest* to write an article on the subject. The latter decided that the subject was one likely to interest his own readers, but felt that the answer should represent the composite views of many authorities rather than an individual choice. So a questionnaire was prepared and fifty-six copies of the letter embodying it sent out—twenty-six to the "literary advisers" of various publishing houses, eight without specification of the individual to the "editor of" authoritative publications, twenty-two to specific individuals whose names occur frequently as contributors to the public press as literary critics, as columnists, as reviewers and as editors. Thirty-three replies were received.

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THE response to the questionnaire shows such a diversity of opinion that the matter seems to be just about as unsettled as it was before. Only one name appears in a majority of the answers, that of Joseph Hergesheimer, who receives twenty-two votes. Following him is Eugene O'Neill with fourteen votes; then come Sherwood Anderson with thirteen, Willa Sibert Cather with twelve, and the fifth place is divided between Robert Frost and James Branch Cabell, who each receives eight. That, as a result, is the *Literary Digest's* five, or rather six. But there were forty-five other names mentioned. Seven votes were cast for Edgar Lee Masters and six each for Sinclair Lewis and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Carl Sandberg, Henry Van Loon and Edwin Arley Robinson received five votes apiece, Scott Fitzgerald and Amy Lowell four each and John Dos Passos and Don Marquis three votes each. In the two ballot list are Ernest Poole, Sara Teasdale, Mary S. Watts, Dorothy Canfield, Heywood Broun, Vachel Lindsay and H. L. Mencken, and those receiving one vote are Conrad Aiken, Waldo Frank, E. E. Cummings, Zona Gale, T. S. Eliot, Don Byrne, Melville Davisson Post, Thomas Beer, Peter B Kyne, Randolph Bourne, Dorothy Parker, George Santayana, Ben Ames Williams, Edna Ferber, James Oliver Curwood, Fannie Hurst, Ring Lardner, Wilbur Daniel Steele, Christopher Morley, Maxwell Bodenheim, William Ellery Leonard, R. H. Holliday, Edward Bok, Hugh Wiley, Ruth Suckow and Ben Hecht.

Authors' Works And Their Ways

Georges Carpentier is making his debut on the screen in London in a dual role as gypsy nobleman hero of a romance of Bath in the heyday of Beau Nash. The film, called "Love's April," is taken from the novel "My Lady April," by John Overton. It will be published here in August by Stokes.

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Doubleday, Page & Co. have acquired from Harper & Bros. the rights to Don Marquis's first book of poems, "Dreams and Dust," which will now appear on their lists with Marquis's other books, "Poems and Portraits," "The Old Soak and Hail and Farewell" and "Sonnets to a Red Haired Lady and Famous Love Affairs."

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Anthony Pryde, who has published within a short period five novels, "Jenny Essenden," "Marqueray's Duel," "Nightfall," "An Ordeal of Honour" and "The Purple Pearl," is to have a new book in October, the title of which is "Clair de Lune." Clair de Lune is not the name of a character in the book but is the title given to an opera, the composition of which figures largely in the story.

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A new and complete edition of the writings of Jens Peter Jacobsen, whose "Niels Lyhne" was published in translation last year by Doubleday, Page & Co., is now being prepared by Gyldendals. The edition is to include all of his letters, sketches, first drafts and unpublished poems. Individuals who have Jacobsen's letters are asked to send them in, the guarantee being given by the Dansk Sprog-og-Literaaturselskab that they will be returned in perfect condition.